



Commentary from
Congressman Joe Pitts
Sixteenth Congressional District of Pennsylvania

204 Cannon House Office Building, Washington, DC 20515

Contact: Gabe Neville, Press Secretary: 202 225-2411 www.house.gov/pitts

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End the Welfare Marriage Penalty

By Congressman Joe Pitts

The movie *John Q*, which is now in theaters, dramatizes a problem faced by thousands of Americans. In the film, John Quincy Archibald (played by Denzel Washington) and his wife Denise (played by Kimberly Elise) are the parents of a young son named Mike (played by Daniel E. Smith). Mike has a congenital heart defect. They are a working-poor family: John's factory job has been cut back to 20 hours a week, and Denise has taken a job at a grocery store. Early in the movie, Denise's car is repossessed. Despite their struggles, they are a happy, loving, Christian family.

When Mike's heart defect is discovered, his parents are told that he must have a transplant or he will die. The price tag is \$250,000 dollars. Though he is insured, John discovers that because his hours have been cut back at work, his insurance coverage has been cut back as well. He can't pay for the surgery, and Mike is going to die.

When applying for Medicaid, the Archibalds are asked: "Are you on welfare?" "No," they say. "We both work." "Too bad," the counselor answers.

Unfortunately, for decades now, that has been a common thread in America's "safety net." Strong, proud, committed couples who are willing to scrimp and save and take any job to support their children are treated worse and qualify for fewer benefits and get less help.

In the real world, had John and Denise never married but simply lived together, they might have gotten more help. Had Denise never taken the job at the grocery store but signed up for welfare instead, they might have gotten more help for their son.

It is a fact that if two poor or working-poor Americans get married, they will likely be instantly disqualified from Medicaid (what is called Medical Assistance in Pennsylvania) and from key welfare programs. Likewise, a struggling couple might only qualify for assistance if they get divorced.

This may be news to some, but not to America's poor, thousands of whom have remained unmarried precisely for this reason. The effect on poor and struggling families has been devastating, particularly for women and for children

According to federal government statistics, women are much more likely to be victims of domestic abuse if they aren't married. In fact, domestic violence against women is almost three times as high among cohabiting couples as it is among all married, divorced, and separated couples combined. In a simple comparison of married couples to couples who just live together, violence against women is five times as high for those who aren't married. Clearly, women are safest when they are living in healthy, committed marriages.

Between 1970 and 2000, the number of children living in single-parent homes jumped from 8.2 million to 19.2 million, nearly a 150 percent increase. The effect of that change has been devastating. Children living with a single mother are six times more likely to live in poverty than children living in an intact family. The median income of a single mother with kids is about \$21,000, compared to \$63,000 for a married couple with kids. Over 30 percent of single parent families live in poverty, compared to only six percent of families led by married couples. Children without two married parents are also more likely to engage in crime, become addicted to drugs, and to die young.

This year Congress is required to reevaluate the nation's welfare laws. Many reforms were made in 1996, geared toward getting people off welfare and into jobs. It has been a tremendous success. But we still have not solved the "welfare marriage penalty."

President Bush has already made several suggestions for America's welfare system. Among them is a requirement that welfare recipients spend 40 hours a week working—either at a job, learning a trade, or job hunting. That's a good idea. The President is also asking for \$300 million to promote healthy, stable marriages.

That's a good thing for a country in which we spend \$150 billion on programs to subsidize and support single-parent families, and only \$150 million trying to reduce out-of-wedlock births in the first place. That's a ratio of a thousand to one. It's time we changed America's welfare system so it helps families rather than hurts them. America's struggling families deserve it, and they desperately need it.

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